Reunion Turns Ten

kidbrothers.net/release/spr92art.html

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> *In 1981, the names Michael W. Smith, Rich Mullins, Kathy Troccoli, and Kim Hill had never been heard in most homes. The song "Friends" had not yet been published, "Awesome God" wasn't even close to being written, and two men active in management, music publishing, and artist development were taking a young Italian girl from New York all over Nashville trying to get her a record deal. Seems the young lady's vocals were a bit too "sensuous", her deep alto voice a red flag to record company execs who thought the Christian music market could never cotton to such passionate singing. Meanwhile, Mike Blanton and Dan Harrell were also trying to get a record deal for a young guy from Kentucky who had a catalog of great songs, but who didn't come across as an artist as much as a songwriter.*
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> *"I can't say we played the project for every potential A&R guy out there, but we played it for the guys that we felt like we needed to be doing business with," remembers Blanton. After striking out, yet believing that they had two potentially influential artists under their management, Blanton & Harrell began to consider a new option for getting their music out.*
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> *"We were trying to convince people that we knew what we were doing. I don't blame anybody for not running with this any faster than they did, but I think that's when Dan and I finally sat down and said, 'This is crazy!' I think if we could go put our own production together with Word..." And history was made. Blanton & Harrell did put that deal together, and in the spring of 1982, Reunion Records was born.*
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> *Kathy Troccoli remembers their delivery. "I was so ecstatic to think that these guys believed in me enough to say, 'You know what KT, if we can't get you a deal, we'll start our own label.' I remember when they said that. And they just did!"*

Michael W. Smith remembers, too. "My relationship with Mike and Dan was all kinda based on the Amy thing at that point. I really started playing keyboards with Amy first, and then I started bringing all these songs in, and they had just started this label. The future was definitely unknown, but there was something - how do I put it? - an extremely deep trust that I had in Mike and Dan... I thought this thing could possibly fly. At that time, obviously I probably didn't think about the future that much. I was just so thankful to even have a contract and to be involved with people like that; to be involved with Amy."

His involvement with Amy Grant, for who he was opening the "Age to Age" Tour in 1982, was the continuation of a lasting friendship with the Chapmans. Michael began writing songs with Gary in 1980. "At the time, Gary was falling in love with Amy. I don't think Amy (had fallen) in love with him yet... but Gary was diggin' that he was on the road with Amy Grant! In 1982, Michael was diggin' it for another reason - it was launching his career. "I did four songs and I ran around like a crazy man. I didn't know what to do with myself on stage, I was so nervous." He would sit at the piano, looking pretty comfortable (do you remember?). "And then I got up, and I was like a chicken with my head cut off. I just felt like I had to move; I was hyper, still am to a certain extent." The songs he brought to the "Age to Age" Tour were written for his first project, aptly titled The Michael W. Smith Project. He had sold that deal to Blanton a few months before, when he brought in "You Need a Savior" for a listen.

"I'll never forget Blanton looking at me and going, 'You know what? You bring nine other songs like that in here and we'll do a record.'" Mike Blanton tells the rest of the story: "We met and hit it off like two brothers. Immediately there was a big connection there. My offer (to make an album) was about as simple and direct as I could make it. That was off the cuff. Little did I know... three weeks later he walked in with 12 other songs."

One of those songs was called "Friends", the one Blanton calls the real hook of the album. Funny thing is, it almost went to Amy Grant. "This would be a huge song. I was always on the lookout for songs for Amy." Then there was the other part of the manager realizing that this song could break Michael W. Smith as an artist. "Well, I have to believe God intervened in a neat way there," Blanton reflects. "Michael was so ready for people to record his songs, he could have gone either way." (By the way, Smitty was

ready to go to LA to seek a pop songwriting deal, had all this fallen through.)

When the first two albums, Stubborn Love and Michael W. Smith Project, appeared on the market, listeners took to the sound, with the help of radio. The fresh, new angle on words and music began to build Reunion's customer base, and a strong group of fans for Troccoli and Smith. They were giving them something for the '80s.

"The thing that was so special about Stubborn Love (which is my favorite record that I did years ago), is that it had so much heart on it, and it was a different record for its time," Troccoli recalls. Speaking of the title song - which continues to be a radio favorite - she says, "There have been 50 million songs about God's love, but never said in that way." Smith continues with her train of thought. "Mike and Dan wanted to be different; they wanted to be fresh. They didn't want to necessarily go with the flow and do what everybody else was doing." And Blanton remembers Smitty's debut in the same light: "It was just the passion and the artistic oomph of that project that got our wheels turning. There really was a believability and an artistic statement, which is what we've tried to base our whole vision on for Reunion's being artistically driven."

Kathy Trocolli treasures her time in the studio in '82, one day actually praying the song, "Lord I Need You Now." Producer Brown Bannister, who Kathy credits with "always fighting for the heart on an album," consented to Kathy singing with nearly all studio lights off. "You can hear the cracks in my voice and a little bit of the crying, and he just kept it. Even when I've been at some desperate times, I've plugged in that song."

"Friends" was the tune from his first album that has, in a way, haunted Smith ever since. Did he look at the finished song and have any clue what its impact would be? "I knew that there was something very special about the song; I knew it was a heart-wrencher kind of thing. I thought it could be big, but I didn't have any idea that it would refuse to die. But I don't really get tired of singing it."

In 1984, Reunion released albums by Pam Mark Hall and Billy Sprague, who opened the 1985 "Friends" Tour with Troccoli and Smith. That tour, Smith's (and Reunion's) first as headliners, hit 87 cities and played to 135,000 people. "To be able to get out and do my thing and get to do it the way I want to, and then to have Kathy and Billy Sprague go out," Smith

reminisces... "We had a great time." Troccoli seconds the motion. "I got to do a major tour and be with incredible people. I loved travelling. When you're doing little churches and then you're doing that kind of a tour, it's incredible.

Reunion artist Rich Mullins can relate to that feeling. He had the formidable task of opening for Amy Grant's "Unguarded" Tour in 1986. "It was really scary. Up until that point, all I had done was play for youth groups, and all of a sudden I was in a room with 10,000 people. It was really terrifying. I don't remember the whole thing exactly, but people tell me it happened. What they say I did was just walked out and grabbed a hold of the microphone for dear life. I also was used to being able to hide behind the piano and guitar. This time, everyone else was playing instruments and I was singing. I just grabbed a hold of the mic, closed my eyes and sang."

This songwriter who sings "because I write the kind of songs not everybody wants to record" had been introduced to Mike Blanton & Dan Harrell through a cassette tape of his song "Sing Your Praise to the Lord" which they solicited for Amy Grant. Mullins remembers his earliest dealing with a record company, during his days of "dire and driving poverty."

"They called me up, and they said that they wanted Amy Grant to record it. I said I thought that was great; I didn't have any idea who Amy Grant was. They said, 'Is this published or what?' And I said, "I don't even know.' I recorded it but that's as much as I knew about it. They said they'd like to talk to me about a publishing contract, and I didn't like the idea of a contract. I said, 'I'm not interested in a publishing contract.' They said, 'Maybe you don't know who Amy Grant is' and went on to tell me how many albums she'd sold, and that really hacked me off because I thought, 'You know what? I don't care if she doesn't sell any or if she outsells Michael Jackson.' If she wants to do the song, that's fine, but I felt very insulted. I was a very overly-righteous kind of a guy at the time.

"Then they said, 'Let us fly you down here.' Well, I love to fly and I would fly anywhere in the world just for the fun of doing it. And I said, 'Sure.' That's how I first talked to them. That was a lot of fun, and I've been talking to them ever since."

As the Reunion artists' exposure and popularity grew, Blanton & Harrell decided to expand quite considerably in 1986, producing projects by five artists new to the label - Rich Mullins, Chris Eaton, Prism, Elim Hall, and

Michael Omartian. Though each project was wonderfully original for its own market, Blanton remembers 1986 as a crux, the toughest time in the history of the label to date.

"In 1986 we made some moves that at this point I would just say were prideful and very cocky (like we could) do anything and it was going to work. We were trying to do more than we were called to do." They had a focus problem. As he tells it, there was a point in '86 where they thought maybe they'd gone too far, that maybe Blanton & Harrell weren't supposed to be together. "There was the point when you finally realize that you are human and you, as much as you believe in God, have to depend on Him on a daily basis. We humbled ourselves to say that if this was not God-ordained we didn't want to be doing it anyway. He had brought us this far; if HE wanted it to go on, WE wanted to go on with it.

And go on they did. 1987 was a rebuilding year that introduced three label additions; rapper Michael Peace, The Awakening, and Renee Garcia, who had also started out with Amy Grant as a backup singer. 1987 also brought the departure of Kathy Troccoli, who decided to return to Long Island for some time out. As you read in these pages, last issue, she's baaaaaack, and obviously glad to be.

"The day I left, I remember Mike Blanton saying to me, 'KT, I just know you'll be back.' At the time, I was so fuzzy about everything that I thought, 'Are you kidding?' It's incredible to have those words ring out in my mind and know that now, at the 10-year anniversary, here I am. I think a lot of people at Reunion wanted me back, but we all had this sense that time needed to go by, because they were growing up at the label, and I was growing up here in New York. That's what's been so wonderful about the reunion with Reunion - God's timing is perfect!"

Mike Blanton understands. "There's a very strong family vibe after there's been a long time - Michael, Rich, Kathy's back here. We're in a funny little place of growth here where we still have a lot of family tradition and yet we're very aggressive as an up-and-coming record label that's trying to break artistic folks." Into the story comes Terry Hemmings.

Reunion Entertainment Group (now encasing Reunion Records and Reunion Music Group) is under the direction of president and CEO Hemmings, all of 32 years of age. If you picture Michael W. Smith's Go West Young Man theme as Reunion's plan of attack, Terry Hemmings

would have to be sitting in the front stagecoach. For the last four years, he's been carrying out the vision the label's management shares, and he sees the re-signing of Kathy Troccoli as a prime example of Reunion's aggressive direction.

"It doesn't mean every artist is going to be pop/dance, whatever, but her vision for crossing all the boundaries and really trying to evangelize to the outside of the Christian bookselling market is a place we want to go. I think that it's just fabulous that it's somebody we've walked with for a long time that we can trust to begin a new era with Reunion."

That era had its roots in Michael W. Smith, whose dream was always to carry the gospel and Christian values to the pop market place. Another rung on the ladder, though, was the signing of Kim Hill, whose 1988 debut skyrocketed her to the top of Christian radio charts. In 1991, she became another of Reunion's artists to catch the vision for pop airplay, and began targeting the college market for concerts and radio exposure.

Rick Cua and Gary Chapman had their first Reunion releases in 1988, plus the label distributed Take 6's Reprise debut. But perhaps the most memorable sound for Reunion in '89 was a single song on Rich Mullins' Winds of Heaven... Stuff of Earth (which he thought would be his last, by the way!).

"I wrote it on my way to a Christ in Youth Conference in Denver, and when I got there I was supposed to lead the worship. I knew some other people there, so I grabbed some of them and said 'OK, I just wrote this song; I don't really know how it goes, but I'm going to try it out tonight, and I need you to help me.' So I taught them the chorus, and I knew how I wanted the accompaniment to go but I couldn't play it and do (the vocals on the verses)."

Well, a friend helped Mullins do the newly-penned "Awesome God" and that night "I had about 1000 kids singing the chorus, and I was really knocked out. I knew I had done something right." Indeed. A most-requested radio song, "Awesome God", was nominated for three Dove awards and voted one of the decade's top three songs by Christian Research Report. Aside from that, it's practically part of the hymnistry by now.

In 1990, the mechanics feel into place as Geffen Records/Uni Distribution contracted with Reunion to promote and distribute its albums in the

mainstream marketplace. The same year, the Michael W. Smith Project was certified gold, with sales over 500,000. New artists in 1990 were Wes King and Steve Grace.

But 1991 was a year of action for Reunion Records. Kim Hill and Wes King opened the "Heart In Motion" Tour for Amy Grant. Kathy Troccoli's first single for pop radio "You've Got a Way" was released. And new acts Mike-E (a rapper from Detroit), Michael James (a Texas balladeer) and Hoi Polloi (a rock band hailing from New Zealand) continued to round out the label in style, lending to outreach in all types of circles. With "Place In This World" Michael W. Smith brought onto the Billboard Hot 100 a #6 song from a Christian record label. The response to the song, on the heels of Reunion Music's published song, "Baby, Baby" was slow to start, but with every week picked up speed. And suddenly a public was buying Go West Young Man, an album with anything-but-subtle Christian messages. "I love that part of it!" Smith says. And Terry Hemmings is excited.

"Michael's broken down a tremendous wall that has existed for 10 years between our Christian music world and the pop music world. He had all the elements - in the traditional secular mold - of a teen idol. I prefer to refer to him as a great role model." Regardless of how you explain it, the public likes Michael. And Michael loves the public. Does he remember the first time he heard "Place In This World" on pop radio? "Oh yeah..." he exclaims. "I just lost it. I just welled up with tears. I was goin', 'this is unbelievable. This is absolutely unbelievable!' I'm the last one who wants to be overly spiritual, but I knew God was in it."

Vision is a word that comes up often with this crowd. "There's no lack of vision here at the company," Smith will tell you. Hemmings clears up the fog surrounding the word with a description of the vision of the Reunion Entertainment Group:

Our vision is not to force people to be somewhere they don't want to be. It's not to strictly try to find, sing, and develop artists that want to be pop stars. Part of our vision is to work with people who have a Christian perspective on music which is similar to ours - more evangelical in nature - than to continue to service only the church and the smaller church market with music that only serves itself. In addition, we have a strong commitment to the segment of our roster who feel a strong call directly to the church. I think that Michael is a good example of an artist who can service the church with a great choral work or a hymn and also write music that speaks

to a much broader audience - and in doing so, create a platform for himself to share his experiences and his beliefs on a national basis that you can't do by focusing the music on a very small target.

"I don't by any means think that every company in our business should be doing what we're doing, because everybody has their own unique vision. If we were all doing the same things, it'd be really crowded. But we feel like there are a few artists and a few career tracks that we're supposed to be involved in that do what Michael's done and what Kathy and Kim and some others do. We are looking at singing and working with some artists whose records won't even go out in the Christian market. We've removed a lot of the qualifiers for what people would traditionally look for in Christian music."

What these Christian businessmen hope for is a product that has artistic integrity (see Kim Hill's Brave Heart for a fine example!), mass appeal (take your pick), and an uncompromising spiritual truth (again, it's everywhere). It's a fine balance, but they're putting heart and soul into the goal. And their artists - not to mention millions of listeners - are reaping the benefits.

What was born of necessity has grown to be what you could call a necessity; a Christian music label showing great leadership in business, ministry, and art. Michael W. Smith has seen the young upstart struggle through infancy, the toddler years, and no pre-teen growth spurts, and has been a party to countless official and unofficial conversations. His overwhelming impression?

"There's something different about Reunion. They have vision that won't quit. It was always this little thing inside me going, 'You know what - I won't be surprised if these guys take it to another planet a few years from now.'"

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